



Contemporary Projects

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Mrzyk & Moriceau and Félicien Rops—You Only Live 25 Times
March 23 – June 4, 2006

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Mrzyk & Moriceau and Félicien Rops—You Only Live 25 Times has been designed as an opportunity for the French artists Petra Mrzyk and Jean-François Moriceau to create an exhibition using the resources of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's permanent collection. From the vast holdings of the department of Prints and Drawings, they have selected twenty-five prints from the nineteenth-century Belgian Symbolist artist Félicien Rops. These prints form both the inspiration for and the accompaniment to Mrzyk and Moriceau's installation. The initial impulse to work with a choice of artworks from the nineteenth century rather than selecting works from contemporary art was based on the desire to bridge the gap between the art of a historical era and a trend in contemporary art that presents drawing as one of today's major medium.

Petra Mrzyk was born in 1973 in Nuremberg, Germany, and has lived in France since the late 1970s; Jean-François Moriceau was born in 1974 in Saint-Nazaire, France. They met at art school in the mid-1990s, and have worked as a couple since 1997. In addition to their drawings, they are also known for their work in animation, including the short film *Looping*, a music video (*Don't Be Light*) for the French electronica band Air, and various commercials broadcast in Europe.

Like most people of their generation in France, Mrzyk and Moriceau have grown up in a cultural climate where the distinction between mass culture and a more traditional, elitist view of art has slowly blurred. This erasing of cultural boundaries is the result of the combined legacy of the student uprising of May 1968 and the initiative (starting in 1981) of the French Ministry of Culture to promote previously oft-ignored artists, such as cartoonists, fashion designers, popular singers, and puppeteers. In this atmosphere, the artists developed a visual style and body of imagery that combine various elements recalling graphic designs prevalent during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Their works often bear titles derived from James Bond movies: *You Only Live 25 Times* alludes both to *You Only Live Twice* (1967) and to the number of prints selected for the exhibition.

Some of the stylistic components present in Mrzyk and Moriceau's work border on the gothic

or macabre, while others evoke historical painting. For instance, in this new installation, one drawing of a reclining nude woman with flowing hair is reminiscent of Ingres's paintings such as *La Source* (1856) or *L'Odalisque* (1814) and is also inspired by Rops's frontispiece *La Fleur lascive orientale*. Other aspects of their drawings come from more contemporary illustration. Some of their works recall the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* animated film; others call to mind the Italian character La Linea, a well-known cartoon figure in Europe. As its name indicates, La Linea is a line drawing persona, slightly ridiculous and grotesque, who perpetually peregrinates on a straight, flat line randomly broken by hazardous gaps.

Like the space inhabited by La Linea, Mrzyk and Moriceau's world is a black-and-white universe populated by absurd and sometimes frightening creatures. Some of them refer in a witty way to the frequent insularity of the art world and its institutions; in a previous drawing, for example, the artists stage a demonstration of framed artworks, marching with picket signs demanding, "We want a new curator." Other images depict an apparently bucolic atmosphere that reveals itself, upon closer inspection, as a

Fig.1: Petra Mrzyk and Jean-François Moriceau, *Moonraker*, 2004, installation at Galerie Air de Paris. Photo courtesy Mrzyk & Moriceau





Fig.2: Félicien Rops,
*Le Catéchisme des gens
mariés* (Catechism for
married people), n.d.,
etching, Los Angeles
County Museum of Art,
gift of Michael G. Wilson.
Photo © 2006 Museum
Associates/LACMA

darker place where deer morph into flashers, skeletons copulate inside caves, and giant mushrooms seem to float above ground.

Mrzyk and Moriceau's drawings often expand in every spatial dimension, rather than being solely confined to a standard rectangular piece of paper. Their wall drawings continue from the wall to the floor and the ceiling; in some installations, their framed drawings are piled on top of one another. In one such installation, for example, a sculpture of their recurring character Mr. Frame (a humanized picture frame complete with limbs) dozes against a wall, with framed drawings of his "dreams" emanating like a cloud onto the wall and ceiling above him (fig. 1).

The artists' style shares some affinities with Félicien Rops (1833–1898), most notably with his darkest series inspired by the decadent concepts popular with the *fin-de-siècle* Symbolist writers of his time, such as Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé. Like Rops, Mrzyk and Moriceau use comical tropes to make their most sinister thoughts more palatable. They share the same temperament for a playful irony, the same desire to draw compositions that seem benign at first glance but at closer range reveal a world of dark and disturbing details. In Rops's prints, as in some of Mrzyk and Moriceau's drawings, everyday objects are fitted with eyes, giving them an omniscient power to spy on human beings. Sexual organs are disembodied,

float in the air, or even morph into monsters.

Rops often subverted the standard designs and compositions of the book illustrations popular in his time. Some of his frontispieces logos, for example, satirize the common frontispiece conventions of using medals, heraldries, and taxidermy trophies, as seen in *Le Catéchisme des gens mariés* (fig. 2). This print presents an assortment of hats and helmets satirizing various bourgeois figures of authority, such as the general, the police officer, the bishop, the dandy, and the capitalist captain of industry.

Behind Rops's bizarre and fantastic images lay the desire to express his moral views about various social, religious, or political topics of his time. In other cases, the prurient drawings that seem offensive or obscene are in fact illustrations Rops was commissioned to design without necessarily adhering to the writer's message. In fact, Rops was a devout Catholic who was ambivalent about the decadent lifestyle depicted in many of his illustrations. While fascinated by some of the excesses of his time, he was also able to see them both humorously and critically, as revealed in many of the minute details he engraved with such virtuosity.

The parallels between Rops's sense of humor and Mrzyk and Moriceau's playful style are obvious; these resemblances are highlighted in a contemporary manner in *You Only Live 25 Times*. This presents the only chance to view this encounter between these three artists, as this site-specific work will be dismantled at the end of the exhibition.

—Noëllie Roussel, Wallis Annenberg Curatorial Fellow, Contemporary Art

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